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SUBJECT Interview with Dr. Osama El-Baz

GEORGE HERMAN: Dr. El-Baz, yesterday Yasser Arafat told his PLO forces to tighten up their defenses in Beirut. And during the night, as you know, Israel attacked in force and took Beirut's airport. As the counselor to President Mubarak of Egypt, how do you evaluate this? What is going on in Beirut?

OSAMA EL-BAZ: What is going on in Beirut is very dangerous, as a matter of fact. It is an Israeli operation, an Israeli attempt to storm the city, to capture it, to eliminate the PLO as a political force after weakening it as a military force. And they believe that by this way they'll be solving the Palestinian question or getting rid of it. Which is not the case. The encirclement of the city of Beirut is not going to -- and the storming of it and the continuous bombardment of the city of West Beirut is not going to contribute at all to a peaceful solution in the region, to the country. And this is apt to increase the degree of tension and instability.

ANNOUNCER: From CBS News, Washington, a spontaneous and unrehearsed news interview on Face the Nation with the political counselor and director of the political office of Egyptian President Mubarak, Osama El-Baz. Dr. El-Baz will be questioned by CBS News diplomatic correspondent Robert Pierpoint; by Karen Elliott House, diplomatic correspondent for the Wall Street Journal; and by the moderator, CBS News correspondent George Herman.

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HERMAN: Dr. El-Baz, your first answer sounded as though you think what is happening in Beirut now is the beginning of the final battle for that city. Is that correct?

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EL-BAZ: Yes, sir. We believe that this is the beginning of the final battle. It reminds me very much of what happened in Warsaw during the Second World War. And I believe that it is most dangerous. We are afraid of the consequences, what will happen throughout the region. And whatever happened in that sensitive region will affect other regions of the world, including this country and its own interests in the area.

KAREN ELLIOTT HOUSE: If the Israelis are indeed launching the final siege on West Beirut, what are the political consequences in the region of that act?

EL-BAZ: First of all, you will find an inevitable radicalization of the Palestinian movement, as well as the Arab movement. Second, you'll not be able to solve the Lebanese questions, let alone the Palestinian question.

The interest of this country in the region will suffer tremendously because the perception of the people there is that the U.S. has acquiesced, one way or the other, to the Israeli operation. The Israeli actions and statements have not done much to dispel this impression. In fact, Premier Begin, the other day, said that he received messages from Washington that the U.S. was not opposed to the bombing of Beirut and bombardment, and so on.

And it is this for this reason that we believe that the consequences will be very grave.

ROBERT PIERPOINT: Dr. El-Baz, despite what some of the Arabs seem to believe, I think the rest of the world recognizes that we really cannot control our friends and allies, the Israelis, that they seem to do what they want to do when they want to do it. As you suggest, we now face a very serious situation in West Beirut.

Do you, as Arabs, have any influence on the Palestinians? Have they not been stalling, and could you not persuade them to leave?

EL-BAZ: The question is not to persuade them to leave. The question is to persuade them that a political solution is in the coming, that the political solution is possible, that this is much better than resorting to violence, and so on. This is our -- the thrust of our effort toward the Palestinians.

We believe that we've been having some success with them. We have succeeded in getting some statements from Chairman Arafat, even though he has not been forthcoming enough. But still, the mere fact that he made these commitments to an American delegation -- out of all delegations, he did not do it

to an Arab delegation, to a Soviet delegation, European delegation, or a Third World delegation. He made it to an American delegation. And that he made it very clear that he prefers a political solution.

PIERPOINT: But that statement that he made did not really say that the PLO recognizes Israel's right to exist in peace. Why can you not persuade Arafat to do that and end this bloodshed?

EL-BAZ: We've been trying to persuade him to that. His argument -- and I think it is not without validity -- is that he cannot do this gratis, he cannot do it unilaterally while Israeli is not doing anything on its part. But if he does this in exchange for a dialogue with the U.S., then what is he going to give in exchange when he sits down with Israel on the negotiating table? He will have to give something. There must be a quid pro quo. And he will be willing to do this in exchange for Israeli recognition of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination.

HOUSE: If you're right and this is the final Israeli assault on the city, then it's too late to talk about what the PLO can do to get itself extracted from the situation. Why do you think -- what is it about this Israeli move that makes you think this is really it, the long-awaited invasion, quote?

EL-BAZ: The invasion might not take the shape of occupying the entire city. It could take some other forms. It could take what they call carpet bombing over a certain part of the city, and then attacking selected areas of the city, until they destroy the will of the resistance over there, or until the local population gets sick and tired of that.

HOUSE: What is it about this particular Israeli move that makes you think this is unlike the bombardments that have been going on in recent weeks, that this is it?

EL-BAZ: Because there has been -- there have been some indications that the Israelis will get impatient. They feel that time is running out and that time is not in their favor, on their side. The opposition to the Israeli operation is building up, not only internationally, but inside Israel itself. And so many people are questioning the wisdom of the whole operation. They are questioning Sharon's policy. They are questioning the basic premises underlying this policy.

It is for this reason that we believe that they might be tempted to finish it abruptly like that.

HERMAN: You mentioned that you in Egypt are afraid of

the consequences. Can you lead me sort of step-by-step through your scenario of the consequences, what will happen, first, to the leadership of the PLO, then to world relations?

EL-BAZ: Sure. If the leadership of the PLO, the present leadership of the PLO is eliminated or weakened, humiliated and weakened -- I mean pushed, forced to surrender or to depart under these humiliating terms, then most -- the movement itself will not disappear. Most likely, it's going to be replaced by a radical leadership that will not accept the proposition of peace. A radical leadership will advocate violence as a means of dealing with Israeli violence, because they will say that Israel is determined to eliminate, annihilate the Palestinians, and so on.

So, they will find much support within the ranks of the Palestinians because so many Palestinians are now questioning. There's a soul-searching movement inside the Palestinians, in general.

HERMAN: You're referring to the Palestinians who are in other Arab countries.

EL-BAZ: Exactly. Because you have Palestinians spread all over the Arab world. You have over 30-50 thousand in Kuwait. You have over a million in Jordan. You have more than a quarter of a million in Syria. You have a big number in Lebanon, in Egypt, in other countries of the Gulf, and so on.

So, it is really dangerous to force the Palestinian movement to become radicalized. And this radicalization will have a snowballing impact on the Arab movement in general. The Arab movement will tend to be radicalized, because this will be the catalyst for radicalizing the Arab movement in other countries. Then the U.S. will be viewed as an accomplice.

The argument for that is that the U.S. could have prevented the Israeli action, they could have moderated, they could have asked Israel to stop when they reached the 25-mile limit. Because Israel's only legitimate claim would be to ask for security guarantees or security measures, an arrangement in the southern part of Lebanon. But to do it this way, to encircle the city of Beirut, to attempt to force a solution to the Lebanese question and to arrange all the political map of Lebanon and to decide the fate of the Palestinians in Lebanon, not only the Palestinians under Israeli control on the West Bank and Gaza, this is all seen and viewed by most Arabs and other people in the region as receiving some kind of an American green light.

PIERPOINT: Dr. El-Baz, what if your pessimistic appraisal is incorrect? After all, the Israeli government, we

understand, has already informed our government that this is not an attempt to take all of West Beirut, that this is, apparently, just a tightening of the noose of the Palestinians. So let's assume the opposite, that the Israelis are not yet ready to move in, that there is still time to work out some kind of a settlement.

Under what conditions could the Palestinians be evacuated? And how many of them, for instance, would Egypt take, and what kind of Palestinian?

EL-BAZ: The Palestinians, in my opinion, are not going to depart from Lebanon unless they know what is going to happen next. They cannot leave just to move from one country to the other. It is not a question of dispersed in a diaspora or creating a new exodus like that. Because what happens after it?

Suppose that they are distributed among three or four or five Arab countries. Then what happens to the leadership, what happens to the cadres, to the fighters, to the average Palestinians living in this area? What is going to happen if they are left to an unknown destiny? Then the situation is going to be worsened, is going to deteriorate progressively.

The important thing is to give them hope. One way to give them hope is to get a commitment, at least from the U.S., that there's going to be a serious effort to solve the Palestinians problem in all its aspects on the basis of recognizing the Palestinian people's right to self-determination.

HOUSE: Have we given you that commitment? Have we given the PLO or anyone else that commitment?

EL-BAZ: No.

HOUSE: Or the Egyptians?

EL-BAZ: No. They are still hoping and they are striving for it. They are fighting and they want to do everything to get it. That's why Yasser Arafat made this commitment to the American delegation. But they have not been able to get any commitment yet. They are still hoping.

HOUSE: Suppose they don't get the commitment and the Israelis go in. I mean how long? You say the PLO is not going to leave without that commitment. And you also said earlier that the Israelis, you fear, are going to go ahead and run out of patience and go on in.

So, what -- how long do you have to get that kind of commitment out of the U.S. before the whole ballgame is over and

the Israelis conclude it?

EL-BAZ: They have to get some signals, at least, that the U.S. is moving in this direction. Because, hopefully, you could have asked for an Israeli commitment. But the Israelis are most uncooperative when it comes to that. It is very unlikely to get an Israeli commitment. And it is for this reason that we're asking for an alternative, for a substitute for this Israeli commitment. The substitute would be an American commitment.

We need a commitment from the U.S. not to deliver an Israeli position, but to take a certain position that is consistent with the American values and the American way of life.

HERMAN: In support of what Bob was saying a moment ago about your view being rather pessimistic, I am informed that Beirut radio has now announced a new cease-fire will take place within the hour. Now, that would give all parties a little time to maneuver.

What should be the first thing done, in the case of such a cease-fire?

EL-BAZ: The first thing that should be done is to persuade the Israelis to stop tampering with the flow of water, electricity, food supplies and medical supplies, and so on, to West Beirut. The besieged city cannot live without water, without electricity, without power, and without the essential foodstuff, and so on. It reflects very badly.

HERMAN: You're aware that the PLO stopped some of the foodstuffs from moving from the U.N. warehouse out into the PLO sections of the city.

EL-BAZ: I think this is a misinformation, because what happened is that some people wanted to transport from foodstuff and medical supplies from Beirut to southern Lebanon. And that's exactly what the PLO objected to. The PLO did not object to moving any stuff to the city. But they objected to moving it from the city. And that's logical. A city under siege like this is not likely to allow the cutting off of a certain supply that exists already within the city. And it is really burdened by half a million people, not only the Palestinians, but the Lebanese as well.

HERMAN: We're stuck on the first step. That should be the first step, concluding the blockade. Then what can be done to put forward the process of peace?

EL-BAZ: Then the Palestinians should get some signals that the Americans are responsive to their demand, to their

aspirations, to their rights, because they would like to know exactly what's going to happen. And [unintelligible] if they know, if they get some assurance, or some signals, at least, that the U.S. is moving in this direction in stages, certain steps, in due course, then they will...

HERMAN: ...you've come to the United States to find out what the American intentions are. Do you think that is what the American intention is? Is it willing to give the Palestinians such a signal?

EL-BAZ: I believe that the U.S. Government is very concerned, and I think the general public is very concerned also. They cannot be indifferent to the suffering and to the damage and the devastation that has been inflicted on the people there in Beirut and in Lebanon, both Palestinians and Lebanese children.

HERMAN: But did Secretary Shultz give you the feeling that he was willing to send such a signal?

EL-BAZ: The feeling, the impression we got is that they open-minded about it, but they believe that this kind of move needs time and it cannot be forced in a short period of time. They should have their own time. And, of course, we believe that this is legitimate.

We have here to emphasize between certain different considerations. On the one hand, we would like to prevent the storming, an Israeli attack on the city, an all-out attack on the city. But on the other hand, we would like to -- we should not concentrate solely and exclusively on the question of Beirut, because the problem is much broader and wider than that.

Suppose we succeed in preventing that, averting an Israeli attack on Beirut. We will still be left with the Lebanese overall question, the Israeli occupation there, the friction that is generated by this occupation, and the setback that is caused to the cause of peace. We have also the overall question of the Palestinians. What's going to happen to the Palestinians? Are the Palestinians going to take -- how are the Palestinians going to respond to that, if they disperse under the present circumstances in different Arab countries?

HOUSE: What is it that you're looking for from the U.S., this signal? What is it you want us to do?

EL-BAZ: We would like the U.S. to endorse the right of the Palestinians to self-determination, to say that in the final settlement the U.S. is going to support the Palestinian people's right to self-determination, as they have supported every

people's right to self-determination. The Palestinians should not be deprived of this God-given right.

PIERPOINT: Didn't the United States do that at the Camp David agreement? I mean that's a part of the whole Camp David framework.

EL-BAZ: Yes, but the language of the Camp David framework is not clear enough on this point. The preponderance of it, the weight of this in the Camp David agreement is there. However, due to the genius of our American friends, there is also what they call constructive ambiguity, as we all know, and the...

HERMAN: The Arabs never do that?

EL-BAZ: They do it in a different way. We all do it.

But the provisions are not very clear. They are still ambivalent and ambiguous at times. What we need is a forthcoming statement here.

And also, we should not forget the fact that the policies, actions, statements of the Israeli government after the signing of the Camp David framework created a wrong impression, because the settlement policy, the practices, the oppressive practices in the West Bank and Gaza, the statements by Prime Minister Begin and his colleagues that there will never be anything on the West Bank and Gaza other than the provisional regime, the transitional regime of then autonomy, and soon, has shed some doubt in the minds of many Palestinians.

What we are trying to do now is to remedy this situation.

PIERPOINT: Would you favor the United States coming out openly for an independent state for the Palestinians on the West Bank? Is that what you're really asking?

EL-BAZ: That's not required at this stage because, in fact, they might opt for a federation or a confederation with Jordan, with Israel, with more than one country or two or three countries in the region. We cannot decide this, otherwise it would be prejudging the issue.

What we should -- what we're asking for is an American commitment to the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination.

HOUSE: Can you tell us where we are in this whole West Beirut process? Have the Arabs come up with an agreement among themselves to take the various PLO factions to different

countries and does that agreement exist?

EL-BAZ: No. No, this agreement does not exist. The Arabs have reached some sporadic principles and general ideas as to the circumstances under which the Palestinians leadership and cadres could leave West Beirut. This does not say that they will accept their going, their departure from Lebanon to other Arab countries. But there are certain sporadic -- you don't find a solid Arab position on that yet.

HERMAN: Even inside Egypt you've had a little vacillation. Didn't the president invite the PLO in June and disinvite them in July?

EL-BAZ: No, no, no. To the contrary. We are not vacillating on that point. We invited them in June. We invited -- we asked them to form a provisional government in exile and we offered them a headquarters in Cairo, and we're still offering that. We'll never withdraw this invitation.

However, we are not willing to take the Palestinians who are forced by the Israelis, because that's not a Palestinian request. Had it been a Palestinian request for us to accept any Palestinians, we would do it gladly. But this is an Israeli demand. And under certain circumstances, without a certain commitment as to what's going to happen next, we believe that we'll be doing the cause of peace a disservice.

PIERPOINT: Dr. El-Baz, would you at this stage favor the United States dealing directly with the PLO leadership, and did your U.N. -- Foreign Minister urge President Reagan to do that?

EL-BAZ: Yes, sir. Because we believe that it will serve a good purpose. This will help the peace process. The important thing is the purpose of these talks with the PLO. The purpose will of course be to persuade the PLO leadership to be more forthcoming, to accept 242...

HERMAN: What did the President say? Or Secretary Shultz?

EL-BAZ: Well, as I said, they were willing to -- they were listening very attentively, they were willing to think, and they're open-minded. We got the impression that they're open-minded. They didn't make any commitment. And they said that they have to take their time. They'd like to examine everything. Their impression was that what Chairman Arafat did was inadequate, it needed some reinforcement, it needed some confirmation or reaffirmation for the U.S. to move in this direction. They said that there's a certain American commitment

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and they stand by it.

HOUSE: Do you detect a change in this country's Middle East policy with the change of Secretaries of State from Haig to Shultz?

EL-BAZ: I'm not sure. I would not place any bets on that. The change, I think, will come as a result of the realization of the American public that what is happening in the Middle East now is not in the interest of this country, is not in the interest of Israel, is not in the interest of the Middle East.

HERMAN: Well, let me put it another way. Did you detect a change from what you once called a haphazard, disconnected moves here and there by the United States revealing a certain lack of direction? Do you detect a change from that?

EL-BAZ: Yes.

HERMAN: Explain.

EL-BAZ: We believe that the State Department or Secretary Shultz are much more organized, and their approach might be more scientific to foreign policy and they're much more systematic.

This impression, as I said, is a very premature impression because you cannot form an opinion in a matter of a few hours. But we get the impression that they are studying each point scientifically and they are doing research, they are trying to be objective about it and they take their time. But they are going -- at least in terms of the approach or procedure.

HERMAN: Thank you very much, Dr. El-Baz, for being our guest today on Face the Nation.